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## THE EIGHTH CIRCLE OF GEHENNA :

BEING AN ACCOUNT OF THE NEW CIRCLE IN HELL DESTINED  
FOR SOCIAL REFORMERS.

(*From the Hebrew of J. L. Peretz.*)

.....

I AM weary. It was a labour beyond my strength, and I toss upon my bed, my mind a monstrous, dully-clacking treadmill, grinding tortuously out the events of the barren day. How did it all happen ? . . . I had been to the Society, had spoken there. My speech was flame ; arrows flew from my mouth ; I menaced my audience as with a sword, a razor-sharp glittering sword. Yes, I had stood there, ranting like Lear, storming like the whirlwind ; and I heard my own words, and I found them good, good exceedingly.

Yes, indeed. For am I not something of a hero ? Do I not give battle for the Beautiful, the Excellent, and the True ? Am I not the devoted knight of Liberty and all those fine sweet somethings which await us in the remote future—that glorious time which we are destined presently to possess ? And there, on the rostrum, I tear from the face of Falsehood her mask, and expose her in the pillory ; I rend the meretricious robes which begaud her foul body, and show you her in her shameful nakedness, leprous and sin-flecked.—

Suddenly I am dumb. My heroic passion is spent, my fire is ashes, my tongue becomes leaden. What has befallen me ? . . . Ah, nothing much—only while I was talking I had involuntarily raised my eyes and my glance had fallen upon a mirror opposite me. And I saw in the mirror that the light of my eyes was evil—a queer, foul light which glowed about my lashes. Those eyes did not at all seem my own.

Once I had seen such eyes.

But when ?

Ah, now I recall it. I had seen them once, when a private at the barracks was being knouted. His brethren, the fellow-soldiers who whipped him, had just such eyes ; eyes which said : *To-day we knout thee, thou wilt knout us to-morrow. Here, then, is payment also for the morrow.* Yes ; not the image of a champion of the Ideal was mine in the mirror ; it was an image of a downright butcher of men.

And, therefore, I was struck dumb. And my silence was to the audience as the lifting from their hearts of a heavy weight. They felt like cattle after a hailstorm; like children who, sitting in the dark, catch the flare of the coming candle; like cripples who lean against a wall, unable to move, and suddenly receive again their crutches and their sticks, and find they can travel where they choose. One of them, a young man, nears a lady, catches her arm, and asks: 'Now is it permitted?' and she shakes her pretty head, but answers gently, smiling: "Yes, yes, it is permitted."

Then I ran from the club as if I had a fiend for driver. And now, here I lie upon my bed, tired and broken. The moon, whose slow, slow gliding over the face of the heavens I had noticed as I ran, glances at this moment in through my window. Is it from dreamland that the rumour creeps how moonlight is mankind's soothing, his redemption from self-torment, his soul's quittance for the bitter reckonings she demands of herself? But, bah! I scorn the puny moon and her sickly light! I scorn conscience! I scorn—yes, even all the Reform clubs in the world. Yet, since it is at no club I find myself, and the moon's is not a face successfully to spit upon, I turn from her to gaze upon the wall. But see—out of the wall a pair of eyes glower upon me. Lunacy! Moon-magic! The old girl is joking with me. Still . . . who owns those eyes? Are they the eyes of the soldier lashing his brother, or the eyes of those who, when I passed from one inanity to another, would greet me on the way with *Rest a little time, thou mighty hero; here is honey, here is nectar—taste! O mighty hero, rest a little time!* But these eyes glow neither with kindness nor with anger. About them a wan face flickers, and here, see, appear beard and earlocks white as snow, a yellow hat, fashioned a hundred years since; and finally, like an exhalation, a man's head thickens from the wall; the head of a Jew, a real, untainted Jew.

"Who are you, friend Jew?" The head seems not to hear, so I repeat, "Old man, who are you?"

Then the chiseled vapour shifts place a little and I hear: "I? I am that stinging rood, *Shevet Mussar*<sup>1</sup>."

Since I know that it is only the moon playing tricks with me, I rather like this witticism. I behave as if I believe in magic and say, "Peace be with you, *Shevet Mussar*."

<sup>1</sup> Literally "Rod of Instruction, or Reproof." It is a popular ethical treatise written in Hebrew, and containing a detailed account of Gehenna. The author was Elijah Kohan of Smyrna. The book was first printed in the second decade of the eighteenth century, about 1719. It has gone through countless editions.

"And with you be peace," he responds gravely, according to rote. Now, somehow, his face is much closer to mine, and I see his body. He is a little man, well-proportioned, but without distinction. His eyes are leaden, dull, lightless, but the look of them is straight and sure, as if they doubt not at all the nature of what they see. His voice, too, is clear, absolutely colourless, without a single tremor. He appears so certain and self-assured that his words pour out of his mouth, yet each one is distinct.

Now I know that *Shevet Mussar* has long ago been gathered unto his fathers, but still—do I fancy that his appearance before me is not fanciful, but that *Shevet Mussar*,—may his memory be the blessing of mankind,—has materialized for the sake of paying me a visit? And fancy as I will, no imagining frees me from this delicious thrill of fear the presence causes. But I take courage and ask, "Then you are he who described Gehenna?"

"Yes." He answers flatly as one might say, "I have eaten," or "I have slept."

"And is your description true? Have you added or detracted nothing? You ought to know now, for without doubt, now you have really seen Gehenna with your own eyes."

"I saw the place also during life."

"During life?"

"Yes, I saw it many times, in dreams."

"And is *Gehenna* truly as you have painted it, word for word?"

"No, my dear friend," he replies with a wisp of a smile, "an eighth circle is now added."

"How? for whom?"

"Listen. The eighth circle is intended for you and your like, for the new and *modern* sinners."

"Why, what is there new about us?"

"Heed me well. Once the soul and the body waged ceaseless war. The soul, part of heaven above, of God himself, strained continually toward the eternal blue, upward; willed to be ever in the sky. But the foul body strained downward ever, low down; it willed to sink itself into dust and ugliness. When the soul was victorious, all was well, and when the body conquered—why, it received its guerdon, since it had sinned indeed. Now then, what is the nature of bodily punishment? Why, torture by means of boiling pitch, of fire, water, serpents, cancers; all sorts of criminal labour in deserts; in forests, in ruined houses, in whatever places of darkness and evil. And there is, in addition, the punishment in the seven rings of *Gehenna*. Each sinful body is condemned to the ring destined for its peculiar type of sin. But in these days things are changed. The souls are combined into a trust—they rebel, they wage war with the angels of heaven, with

all established order, with all created things. They wish to remodel the world, to transmute the universe, to turn all things topsy-turvy."

"The latter-day sinners are therefore not bodies, but souls. You fellows wish to achieve the end, to see the curtain fall, to hear the grand finale. You have no time, your eyes crawl from their sockets with impatience; with impatience your ears grow above your skulls. You behave just as if the world were yours; as if all men were your slaves and bound to do your will. For you and your like there is no place in the seven rings of *Gehenna*."

"Then there is no burning pitch in the newly created eighth ring, eh?"

"No."

"And neither fire nor water?"

"Neither."

"And perhaps the bastinado is also banned?"

"There is not even the memory of a whip."

"And one may eat and drink and sleep there?"

"There you may even read and write books."

"But wherein is the castigation?"

"Patiently, patiently:—do you see that heavy cloud swelling in the east? It's moving toward the moon. When her face will be darkened by it, I must return to my rest. But as it's moving slowly, I shall lose no more time and relate at least a thousandth part of the terror. . . . Heed me well . . . a man like you for instance, who is always absorbed in 'the Ideal,' is placed naked before a mountain of snow. Behold him, how he stands powerless. But an Ideal occurs to him, and once it comes, it is transformed into passion. The man wills to make of the snow, water, and if so to do is his will, then come what come may, he *must* do so. And if he must—why, he does, for by his deeds only was he numbered on earth among the famous heroes. Therefore he warms the snow with his body, he embraces it, presses it close to him, pours his breath into it, infuses into it his very self, his soul and his body. He dreams: *Perhaps the snow will melt, at the end of one hundred and twenty years*. And with fervid giving he gives the snow all the warmth of his body, all the fire of his spirit . . . the deathless life that is in him, gives them to the snow, the horrible white mountain of snow . . ."

"But perhaps there are devils and she-devils who, with whips goad him on to this task?"

"No; no, not at all. Have I not told you. There are no goads in the eighth circle of *Gehenna*. His human will, his instinct, is goad enough; is of all goads the best. . . . And now the man loves the snow as his life. That snow!—it is his pride, his all-hope, the ground of his Ideal. He knows, and it is an intense, overmastering, driving

knowledge, that the snow is like himself, unhappy; that it can be happy only when it will melt, only when it will flow away into water. For without a doubt water is happiness and joy. All that melts, that flows, . . .”

“Yes, yes, what then?”

“You shall hear. Another is placed on a plain of clay and mud. Over his head is a wonderfully beautiful heaven unmarred even by the lightest cloudlet, smooth, empty, without sun, moon, or stars. There is not even the faintest blur of a milky way. For to tell the truth, this is no heaven, but a sort of sheet drawn over the face of heaven. And the man’s feet squash through the clay and the mud, and he is the only living being in this desert, this wilderness of desolations. He becomes very lonely, he is weary of his own fellowship, he wills to resurrect the dead, to breathe life and soul into his surroundings. There, on earth, he had suffered for tens of thousands, had wrought for tens of thousands, had thought for tens of thousands. Indeed, indeed, his soul was the only soul of millions. So he feels that he should be like God, that he must busy himself with creating worlds. And that which the Holy One, Blessed be He, has achieved, he also achieves. He takes the dust of the earth, he takes mud and clay, and wills to create . . . what think you he wills to create? . . . birds, with wings; yea, even eagles. His first creatures are little, but they have wings, wings. It is their bodies he first makes, then he breathes his own soul into them, and they live, the little birds, and the man is very happy, his feet twitch with dance while he calls to them: *Fly, fly my little birds! into the air, fly!* But the birds do not fly. They creep about on the ground, dig in the clay in search of a bit of worm to support their fainting little hearts. But there are no worms, and they die of *hunger*. And when a pair of birds do finally rise into the air and do fly a little, they are male and female, and toy with each other, and laugh. And the man cries: *Heavenward! heavenward!* But they laugh. Whereon the man seizes lumps of clay and throws them at the birds, and kills them. The field becomes heaped with cadavers—dead eagles. About and about and about him, only cadavers.”

“Unhappy man!”

“Another sinner is thrown into a cave, among a tribe of wild hounds.”

“And do they devour him alive?”

“God forbid. They are ravenous, those dogs, but him they touch not. He speaks to those ravenous dogs. He is their prophet, an apostle unto caninity. At first his speech is the speech of dogs, but when they begin to understand him he interpolates a few human words. Behold him, how erect he is, speaking motionless, his eyes fixed upon those hounds. An evolution begins its way, the species

changes; he is making of the hounds—men. One of them has already risen on his hind-legs, and is groping with his fore-paws clumsily about him. Another is still barking, but in his dog-voice the man catches a wholly new expression, a human tone. The man continues thus, tongue and eye pouring a wondrous magic upon the dogs. See now—they are all upright, they stand like men; here is one raising his fore-paws like a hand. And see! it points aloft, toward heaven. There, in that dog's eyes do you see no gleam, no shade of *will*, of *self-consciousness*? Another minute, and the eyes of all these dogs shall shine so, all shall *will*. They have forgotten their hunger, their caninity. Just one moment more, and *thought* will waken in them, *thought*, great, marvellous . . .”

“And if it does waken, what then?”

“Ah, but it never will waken. At the critical moment an evil angel somehow appears and throws a bone into the cave; then the hungry dogs become again—hungry dogs. The dog-apostle, after the bone is left gnawn and marrowless, begins again—and then again, for ever and for ever.”

“Horrible!”

“Not so fast. I saw one of the sinners at the foot of a high mountain on whose top gleams a wondrous light which draws him up, up towards its magic glow. He thinks: *If only I reach that mountain top, I may float in a sea of light, I may have the stars for my fellows, and be in truth a child of high heaven.* And he wills to attain that luminous station. Oh, how he craves to be there, there in the mazes of the hosts of light!”

“And he can't ascend I suppose?”

“Beside him, there lies on the ground a woman. When he takes a few steps up the mountain, she opens her eyes. And in her eyes is also a magical light; also in her eyes are heaven, sun, stars, and the glow of bliss ineffable. Therefore he descends, and then she shuts her eyes.”

“Wonderful!”

“So then, he stands, dazed, broken, between heaven above and heaven below, between the unattainable light above and the curtained light below . . .”

“But, *Shevet Mussar*, you are making fun of me. Why doesn't the man take the woman up with him?”

“The woman is very heavy: besides, *she will not go*. . . . And now, as to the eagles with their swine-hides—”

“What are those?”

“Oh, mere nothings. The souls of your prophets and seers transmigrate into the bodies of eagles, great broad-winged eagles. Only their skins are those of swine. And your seers rise into the air.

They fly very high, they wish to conquer heaven, to loot the Ineffable Throne, to take the place of very God. But when they rise into the air, their swinish skins split. They get intensely painful wounds. So they drop back to earth, into its muddy waters, where they soak their poor skins. Then up they go again! And so they fly—upward and down, downward and up—”

Suddenly the moon vanished, and with her the *Shevet Mussar*. I rose and lighted a candle. Upon my table I found a post-card on which was written: *You are invited to attend a meeting of the Reform Club to-morrow. Subject: Human Darkness: How to Illuminate It.*

I burned the card.

HORACE M. KALLEN.